

Georgia woman learns toll of flesh-eating bacteria

By *JEFF MARTIN / Associated Press*

ATLANTA (AP) — Faced with the prospect of losing both hands and her one remaining foot, a young Georgia woman battling to survive a case of flesh-eating bacteria that has already claimed one leg mouthed the words "Let's do this."

Aimee Copeland, 24, "shed no tears, she never batted an eyelash," her father, Andy Copeland, wrote on Facebook on Friday about the conversation he and his wife had with their daughter the day before.

"I was crying because I am a proud father of an incredibly courageous young lady," Copeland wrote.

It was not immediately clear Friday whether the surgeries had already been performed. A hospital spokeswoman referred questions to the father's online post.

The story of Copeland's battle to survive has inspired an outpouring of support from around the world. The University of West Georgia student developed a rare condition called necrotizing fasciitis after suffering a deep cut in her leg in a May 1 fall from a homemade zip line over the Little Tallapoosa River.

She has been hospitalized in critical condition at an Augusta hospital, battling kidney failure and other organ damage. She had been on a breathing tube until recently, when doctors performed a tracheotomy, her father said.

Until Thursday, Aimee Copeland did not know the full extent of her condition, only that her hands were badly infected.

Andy Copeland said he told his daughter about what had happened since the accident, how her one leg had been amputated. Doctors had once characterized her survival as "slim to none."

"We told her of the outpouring of love from across the world," her father said. "We told her that the world loved and admired her. We explained that she had become a symbol of hope, love and faith. Aimee's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She was amazed."

In Copeland's case, the necrotizing fasciitis was caused by bacteria known as *Aeromonas hydrophila*, which is found in warm rivers and streams. Many people exposed to the bacteria don't get sick. Only a handful of necrotizing fasciitis infections caused by the bacteria have been reported in medical journals in recent decades.

Under the condition, the bacteria emit toxins that destroy muscle, fat and skin tissue.

Andy Copeland said he learned Thursday that doctors wanted to amputate his daughter's hands and remaining foot. Doctors were concerned she could develop respiratory problems and if her hands released an infection in her body there was a risk she could become septic again, her father said.

"We had a window of opportunity to perform the amputations and have a successful outcome," he said. "As they usually do, the doctors were presenting us with a medical no-brainer. We had to do what is necessary to save Aimee's life."

At that point, the family decided to share the situation with their daughter.

Copeland said he showed his daughter her hands, told her they were not healthy and were hampering her progress.

"Aimee, I do not want anything to happen to you," Copeland said he told his daughter. "Your mind is beautiful, your heart is good and your spirit is strong. These hands can prevent your recovery from moving forward. The doctors want to amputate them and your foot today to assure your best possible chance of survival."

Aimee Copeland nodded her understanding.

Her father explained that she would eventually be fitted with prosthetics to help her get around and she nodded again.

Then she smiled, raised her hands up and looked at the damage. She then turned to her family, gathered by her bedside and mouthed the words: "Let's do this."

Her father said he left the room with tears in his eyes.

"I wasn't crying because Aimee was going to lose her hands and foot, I was crying because, in all my 53 years of existence, I have never seen such a strong display of courage," Copeland said.